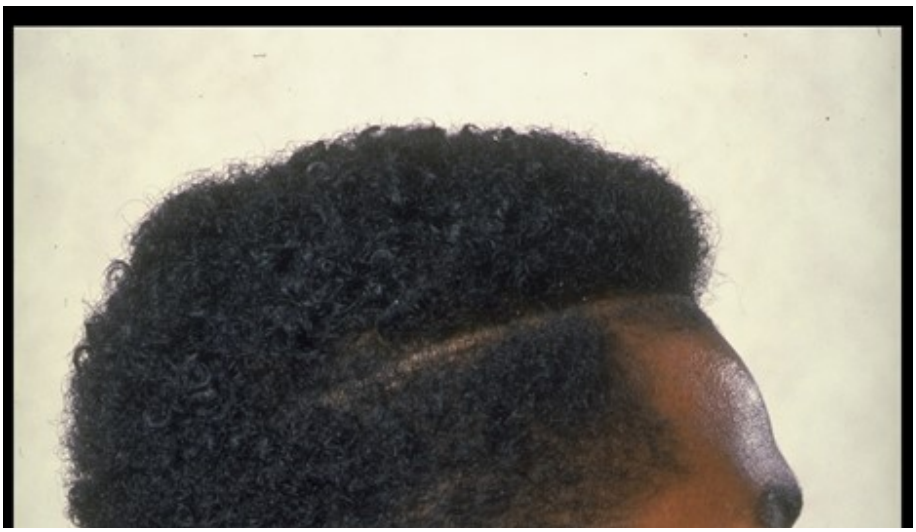
Rat tails: a history of hair’s sleaziest style



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From punk rock rebels to trendy twinks, the rat tail's history is intertwined with themes of class, identity and political defiance

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Rat tails in pop culture

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"Never trust a dude with a rat tail," cautions HBO's recently cancelled show, *The Idol*. If the series got anything right, it's the widespread disdain for the hairstyle sported by The Weeknd's character, Tedros. In a tangled lineage of hair heritage, think of the rat tail as the forbidden love child of the ponytail and mullet. Aptly named after the rear end of its rodent counterpart, the hairstyle is characterised by an isolated long strand of hair at the nape of the neck, often braided, beaded or bleached.

If the mullet was thought to turn heads, consider the rat tail a real neckbreaker. The style found its niche in the gritty underground of the punk subculture in the mid to late 1980s. As the mullet began to oversaturate the mainstream, the rat tail offered a more unusual alternative. It wasn't just a hairstyle; it was a bold political statement, declaring a decree of defiance and individuality. Alongside mohawks and liberty spikes, the hairstyle integrated into the distinctive countercultural aesthetic; often sported alongside leather-studded jackets, torn denim jeans and t-shirts splashed with political slogans.

However, although rat tail-adjacent hairstyles can be traced back to Native American tribes, the exact origin of the style remains unclear. Early roots can be found within the Polynesian diaspora,

where the rat tail serves as a powerful link to one's ancestry, a rite of passage amongst young me
Yet a common misconception attempts to place its origins in ancient China, mistaking the style for the queue – a hairstyle with its own distinct and complex history.

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In actuality, the rat tail's journey through culture is one that weaves heritage, pop culture and societal complexities between its twisted strands. Besides the expected sightings on 80s pop stars like New Kids on the Block, the rat tail has graced the heads of a range of figures such as Star Wars Jedi Anakin Skywalker, David Bowie, and numerous manga characters. In the realm of sports culture, there are figures like Australian rugby player Jayden Campbell and baseball player Luke Scott, while the Argentine footballer Rodrigo Palacio sparked a surge in the popularity of rat tails among aspiring players. A deep dive through the Instagram-filtered haze of 2013 also shows Rihanna and Miley both sporting various takes on the rat tail look.

More recently, we witnessed the rat tail's resurgence on our runways, with a procession of mode at the Ann Demeulemeester SS24 show proudly showcasing the look. Evan Mock boldly unveiled his own rat at NYFW earlier this year, while Kristen Stewart, designer Zoe Latta and model Edie Campbell have all rocked the look.

Evan Mock on the runway during the Head of State AW23/24 Photo by Victor VIRGILE/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images

"We often forget that the nape of the neck is traditionally seen as an erogenous zone – one of the

most kissable areas on the body – so why not draw attention to it with a carefully styled plait?" sa fashion journalist and author Andrew Tucker. "The issue with the rat tail isn't the haircut but the name itself – give it a rebrand and more people would embrace it; it can look great on the right person."

Unfortunately, often it's not the right people embracing the style – wearers like Tedros and Shia LaBeouf have solidified the rat tail's sleazy cultural reputation. Meanwhile, complex classism has further complicated its connotations. Given its strong anti-establishment associations, the rat tail once thrived within working-class communities. Consequently, discussions about the rat tail on Reddit threads frequently devolve into classist stereotypes which synonymise rat tails with unemployment and Mountain Dew.

Not found

> i think it's time to discuss hongjoong's rat tail pic.twitter.com/fzVNSAqP7T
>
> — @halaziayeo (@nostalgichwa) May 10, 2020

However, perceptions of the rat tail are undergoing a transformation, finding its home in a new nest of subculture. While it remains largely underground, the style is growing in popularity among the queer community, evoking memories of the mullet boom of 2019. It's mostly appearing in the sweltering basements of underground venues, peeking out from the back of Y2K trucker caps. In these spaces, the rat tail is still a symbol of defiance, but it's also a statement that embraces a more experimental approach to gender identity and personal style.

Glasgow-based queer hair collective PONYBOY can attest to this surge in popularity. They explain how select clients find the simplicity of the style allows for easy incorporation into their existing looks. "For our first hair showcase, we incorporated a rat tail that draped down the back and attached to a buttplug,

and the performer pulled it from inside himself during the performance," recall the founders, Dill and Reece, fondly. As the rat tail becomes more prevalent in these spaces, even more variations of the style are emerging, whether that's dyed, chopped or clip-on.

No doubt the rat tail is not for everyone, even PONYBOY concedes as much. Yet from its punky subculture roots to its newfound home on Dalston Superstore's curbside, the ratty stands as a symbol of defiance and individuality. One which deserves some amount of recognition. Love it, hate it, or critique it, the hairstyle prompts a dialogue around identity stereotypes and celebrates unapologetic self-expression – one strand at a time.

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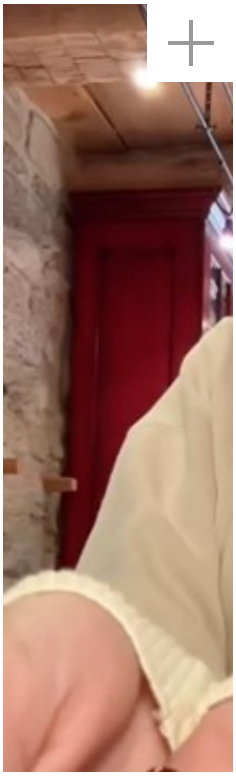

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